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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 000697

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NSC FOR ABRAMS/SINGH/MARCHESE/HARDING

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/17/2017

TAGS: PGOV PREL LE

SUBJECT: LEBANON: BERRI PRESENTS HIS ROADMAP:  
"CONSTITUTION, CUSTOM, AND CONSENSUS"

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey D. Feltman. Reason: Sections 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

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¶1. (C) In a 5/16 meeting with A/S Welch, Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri argued that the U.S. should welcome and support his announcement of, and commitment to, a 9/25 parliamentary session to initiate Lebanon's parliamentary elections. That date can be used as the action-forcing event to resolve the presidency. Any valid election will require a two-thirds quorum, Berri argued, due to precedent and as a sign of national consensus. Finally, Berri sought U.S. support to avert President Lahoud's effort to form a second government, and offered comments on U.S.-Iran relations. End Summary.

ANOTHER INSTITUTION IN JEOPARDY

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¶12. (C) Parliamentary Speaker Berri, accompanied by MP Ali Bazzi and Foreign Policy advisor Ali Hamdan, warmly welcomed Assistant Secretary David Welch and Ambassador Feltman on May 16, recalling his close cooperation with U.S. officials to end the July-August war. Berri then reiterated a carefully prepared explanation for his failure to convene parliament; it is not to avoid the issue of the tribunal, but rather because the cabinet is illegitimate without Shia participation. (The Lebanese cabinet sits on a raised dias behind the Speaker during parliamentary sessions, an honor Berri refuses to convey since the Shia seats would be empty.) Since the problem is not with the tribunal, but with the government, UN Security Council passage of the tribunal under Chapter VII will not change the political stalemate in Lebanon, Berri asserted. Instead, only a national unity government can end the political stalemate and avert a two-government scenario.

¶13. (C) In turn, A/S Welch commended Berri for representing both Shia and national interests during the war, but questioned Berri's decision not to guard national interests this spring by opening parliament. A/S Welch urged Berri to use both his political influence and parliamentary role to solve the political crisis. A/S Welch reminded Berri that current developments threaten both his personal political position and the institution of parliament; the Shia position as Speaker of the Parliament could fall into the complete disarray that the presidency has fallen into if Berri does not act.

BERRI'S ROADMAP OUT OF THE CRISIS:

## CONSTITUTION, CUSTOM, AND CONSENSUS

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¶14. (C) "My road map now is to use the constitution and custom to reach consensus" and form a new government, Berri told us. Berri is ready to open parliament as soon as a new government is formed, and to that end has committed himself to convening a special limited electoral session of parliament at the first possible opportunity. He is committed to the parliamentary session to elect the president even if the cabinet crisis is not resolved, he explained, for then the parliament meets as an electoral college, without the presence of GOL cabinet ministers. The first date possible will be two months before the president's term ends on November 24. Once the new president takes office, the constitution requires that the cabinet dissolve and the president form a new cabinet.

¶15. (C) Berri argued that based on precedent and the need for national consensus, a two-thirds quorum is necessary for the first round of voting. Since the time of independence, no president has been elected with less than two-thirds of the parliament present. This tradition reflects a national desire to demonstrate consensus. This time an adequate number of MPs will show up to vote only if there is consensus prior to the election. In addition, "If we have consensus, it does not matter whether the candidate is from March 14, March 8, or some other group", Berri said. He added, "I am with compromise because I don't want Lebanon to continue like this." If after the first round of voting no consensus is reached, during the second round of voting a simple majority will be adequate.

¶16. (C) Berri argued that the U.S. should welcome his commitment to 9/25 opening date for the presidential rounds

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in parliament. This date can be the action-forcing event that allows a consensus to emerge.

¶17. (C) A/S Welch reminded Berri that to ensure free, democratic institutions for Lebanon's future stability, a president must support such a platform and not be beholden to any foreign power. Berri responded, "If you want a truly Lebanese rather than a pro-U.S. or pro-Syrian president, you need a Lebanese solution." Such a solution can best be reached by applying the constitution and encouraging consensus by requiring a two-thirds quorum for the election, he clarified.

BERRI SEEKING U.S. SUPPORT

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¶18. (C) On the way out of the meeting, Berri sought indirect U.S. support. The head of the EU parliament is due to arrive for a visit on May 31, which is the day the first Lebanese parliamentary session in 2007 is due to end. Berri asked that we encourage the EU to move up this date to give him an excuse to convene parliament briefly before the session ends, in order to prevent President Lahoud from calling the parliament unconstitutional because it did not meet as required. President Lahoud is waiting for an excuse to form a second government, Berri declared. (It was not clear from this meeting how Berri would avoid having Siniora's cabinet show up to this session.)

¶19. (C) Berri also expressed a keen interest in the status of U.S.-Iran relations, and tried to offer advice. He urged the U.S. to focus on those areas the Iranian ambassador has told Berri are shared bilateral interests: the Gulf, Iraq, Afghanistan, and the Palestinian territories. Don't worry about apparent divisions in Iranian decision-making, Berri advised us, as only Khamenei's opinion counts. In a back-handed swipe at Siniora, he cautioned A/S Welch about U.S. support for "weak leaders" in the region. Finally, Berri noted that Al-Qaeda fighters from Afghanistan are

Iran's worst enemy, as the Al-Qaeda recruits in Iran now prefer to target Shia rather than Americans in Iraq.

¶10. (U) This message has not been cleared by A/S Welch.  
FELTMAN